Early in the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, King Arthur (played by Graham Chapman) confronts a thirty-seven year old peasant called Dennis (played by Michael Palin). King Arthur is trying to learn who lives in a nearby castle, but instead finds himself reluctantly locked in a discussion with Dennis about the relative merits of monarchy as opposed to other forms of rule, such as by anarcho-syndicalist communes. When Dennis refuses to stop questioning Arthur about the basis of his claim to monarchy, Arthur explains, “The Lady of the Lake, her arm clad in purest shimmering samite, held Excalibur aloft from the waters to signify that by Divine Providence I, Arthur, was to carry Excalibur . . . That is why I am your King.”1 Dennis replies: “Look strange women lying on their backs in ponds handing over swords . . . that’s no basis for a system of government.” Arthur grabs Dennis by the collar. As a crowd gathers, Dennis shouts: “Come and see the violence inherent in the system. Help, help, I’m being repressed!” Caught in an awkward situation, Arthur pushes Dennis into the mud with the dismissive phrase “Bloody peasant!” As Arthur leaves, Dennis says in triumph, “Did you see him repressing me, then? That’s what I’ve been on about . . .” It is also in a sense what I am on about in this essay with the phrase “systemic violence.” I hope to be a little more persuasive than Dennis, but the aim is the same: I want to engage in a discussion of how the violence inherent in the system comes to appearance.

The film was released in 1974—when the memory of the student revolts of the late sixties were still fresh—and anybody who grew up in England in that era, as I did, would have no difficulty recognizing Dennis, who was a common figure selling socialist newspapers on university campuses and on street corners in nearby towns. Dennis and his mates saw clearly what so many older and more established members of society could not or did

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not want to see: “the violence inherent in the system.” Their strategy was to hold demonstrations on causes which had fairly broad support—such as opposition to apartheid and to the Vietnam War—and try to provoke the police, thus making visible the lengths to which “the establishment” would go to repress dissent. Whenever the police did react, the International Socialists, or whichever group it was, would declare victory, as, of course, did the extreme right wing of the Conservative Party who would come out in favor of the police and win the support of that part of the public fearful that the country was headed toward anarchy. These very different reactions are evidence of a serious fissure within society, but it also shows the difficulty of convincing those who are not already persuaded that the system is saturated with repressive violence. One should add that the same drama is still being played out today in so-called “hot spots” across the globe.

The phrase “systemic violence” may at first sight sound inflationary, perhaps even metaphorical, and in danger of distracting attention from what is construed as real violence, the kind that leaves blood on the floor and on someone’s hands. Violence grabs our attention. It does so whether on the street or on the screen. So when we think of it we are apt to think of the most visible cases of violence. But abstracted from the framework from which and within which they arise, violent acts appear anomalous and usually irrational until located in a narrative of who started it and why the response takes a certain form. Systemic violence is not only hard to see, but hard to make sense of.

It is because systemic violence is hard to see that my investigation of it will be phenomenological. I do not understand phenomenology as straightforward description but as the letting appear of what is not apparent. It is the vision of the invisible in what is visible. Systemic violence by nature “loves to hide.” In order to make life palatable, we train ourselves not to see this violence. There is a great deal at stake in not seeing it, not least our sense of ease in the world, our comfort in our own circumstances in spite of the privileges on which that comfort rests. Can we feel at home in a world created by past suffering? We can do so only so long as we pretend it never happened.

One way in which we habitually suppress any sense of systemic violence is by abstracting violent events from the context which gives rise to them, a context which for the most part we do not create, but merely inherit. Systemic violence understood as the violence that pervades a society as the very condition of its perpetuation is tolerated because we have found the means to keep it largely hidden, visible only in its effects: